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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000767

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: TALK OF PROGRESS MET WITH SKEPTICISM IN
KURDISH SOUTHEAST

Classified By: Adana Principal Officer Eric Green for reasons 1.4(b,d)

This is a Consulate Adana cable.

11. (C) SUMMARY: Despite fevered media speculation in recent weeks about "solving" the Kurdish issue, contacts in Turkey's southeast remain skeptical that the Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led government has the will to make bold reforms in the short term. The progressive rhetoric is met with skepticism, if not outright cynicism, by most pro-Kurdish activists, though some scholars acknowledge there may be a historic opportunity. A key missing element to progress is for the AKP government to accept the DTP as an interlocutor and give official recognition to the Kurdish identity. Given the legacy of empty promises and neglect from the government, Kurds in the region perhaps have a right to be doubtful that this time will be any different. At the same time, Kurdish leaders need to be prepared to reciprocate overtures coming from Ankara. The government and the state bureaucracy will have to demonstrate the will to back the rhetoric with action to convince the southeast region's Kurdish population that change is truly at hand. END SUMMARY.
SE KURDS UNDERWHELMED BY ANKARA'S NEW ENTHUSIASM

12. (C) On a May 17-22 visit to Mardin, Midyat, Hasankeyf, Batman, and Diyarbakir, Poloff found most of his interlocutors skeptical, if not cynical, about the increased rhetoric coming from Ankara regarding a solution to the Kurdish issue. Although contacts welcomed President Abdullah Gul's recent statements, for example, acknowledging that the Kurdish issue was Turkey's biggest problem, they noted that they had heard similar statements from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2005 and that expectations following the 2007 parliamentary elections had largely gone unmet. On May 20, President of the Batman Bar Association Sedat Ozevin told Poloff that they had heard positive statements on the Kurdish issue emanating from Ankara before and that the GOT will have to demonstrate what steps it is actually prepared to take. They described the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party's (DTP) advances in the March 2009 local elections as a reaction against the AKP government and Erdogan -- notably his "love it or leave it" speech to the AKP local branch in Hakkari in November 2008.

13. (C) Ozevin questioned the AKP government's sincerity of its statement on solving the Kurdish issue while at the same time it was having dozens of DTP members, including three deputy chairmen, arrested. Although he acknowledged that one could not really separate the DTP from the terrorist-insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), he claimed that at the start of the process it was unrealistic

to ask the PKK to abandon its weapons. They thought a more realistic proposition would be to ask the PKK to withdraw to positions where it will not clash with the Turkish military -- and simultaneously direct the military not to harass the PKK. Ozevin outlined four steps Ankara could take to develop good will with the Kurds -- some of which the government is already contemplating: 1) allowing Turkish signs to be displayed with a subtext in Kurdish, 2) expanding Kurdish language classes, 3) allowing sermons to be delivered in Kurdish, and 4) granting to private Kurdish television stations the same conditions given to TRT-6, the state-run Kurdish-language TV station. He also thought the Ergenekon investigation needed to make progress on the mystery killings and disappearances of the 1990s in the southeast -- incidents perceived by Kurds as key to unraveling Turkey's "Deep State."

14. (C) On May 18, President of the Mardin chapter of the Human Rights Association (IHD) attorney Erdal Uzun and his colleague, attorney Huseyin Cihangir, acknowledged to poloff that the debates of the past few weeks had created some optimism in the region. However, they claimed different elements of the GOT continued to pursue conflicting approaches to the Kurdish issue. As an example, Uzun noted that, even as Gul has called for dialogue, prosecutors recently arrested scores of DTP members and a court sentenced a pro-PKK, Kurdish teenage demonstrator to a 40-year prison sentence. He argued that the Kemalist concept of the unity state was at the heart of the problem and that, as such cases illustrate, solving the Kurdish issue demands allowing freedom of expression. (NOTE: What the comment does not reflect is recognition of the fact that the AKP and government officials often oppose actions taken by Turkey's

ANKARA 00000767 002 OF 002

independent and often staunchly secularist judiciary, especially cases brought by overly nationalistic prosecutors who see it as their duty to protect Turkey's Kemalist traditions and their view of Turkey's unitary identity. END NOTE)

KURDS' DEMANDS: IDENTITY AND OCALAN

15. (C) Uzun pointed to the enshrinement of Kurdish identity in Turkey's constitution, the easing of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's prison conditions, and the passage of a general amnesty for PKK fighters as keys to a solution. He claimed that the current "repentance law" (article 221 of the penal code) aimed at encouraging PKK members to surrender demonstrated a completely wrong mentality or understanding. The PKK members did not feel that they had to "repent" for anything, and as long as they were asked to, it would not work.

16. (C) In a May 21 discussion with Poloff, DTP Diyarbakir Deputy Provincial Chairman Fehti Gunes asserted that the PKK needed to be recognized as a vital component of the broader Kurdish movement. It should not be condemned by the United States or the EU as a terrorist organization, he asserted. Gunes argued for the recognition by the GOT of the PKK as a legitimate interlocutor and the freeing of Ocalan from prison. Gunes complained that Prime Minister Erdogan was not even willing to shake his DTP colleagues' hands in parliament, so how could there be true dialogue? He said until the government demonstrated that it was sincere and the Kurdish identity was recognized and accepted, a solution would be impossible.

17. (C) Not all of our interlocutors concentrated on the negative, however. Both attorney Sezgin Tanrikulu, a member of the Diyarbakir chapter of the Human Rights Foundation, and Dicle University sociology professor Mazhar Bagli expressed optimism, saying conditions were ripe for greater democracy and reconciliation. Bagli thought that comments made by the PKK's Murat Karayilan to the press signaled a new willingness to end the armed struggle. In a May 12 meeting, Hamza Yilmaz, a Mersin-based former lawyer for PKK leader Ocalan, also expressed optimism about the prospects for a solution. He thought Erdogan was committed to reforms; elements of the State had held him back in the past. Erdogan occasionally made missteps when he acted impulsively, but he appeared to

again be listening to his advisers. Yilmaz thought that "doves" were in ascendance in the PKK and the DTP. He pointed to the ouster of Dr. Erdal Barhoz from the PKK leadership as an example. He suggested that the arrests earlier this month of the DTP members was a coordinated action with the government on the part of the security forces. While the government made overtures on the Kurdish issue, hardliners were systematically eliminated in order to facilitate progress. In fact, Yilmaz claimed that moderate DTP members were secretly pleased with the recent arrests because they removed hard-line elements. (In our subsequent discussions with DTP officials in Adana and Diyarbakir, any such satisfaction was kept well hidden, however.)

18. (C) Kurds in Turkey's southeast have met pronouncements on desire for a solution to the Kurdish issue from GOT officials and senior politicians in Ankara with not so much a healthy sense of skepticism, but rather a jaded pessimism. While some of this cynicism is a defense mechanism born of disappointment and knee-jerk PKK apologia, it also serves as a reminder that achieving consensus among the power elite of Ankara is one thing and producing a solution that will win buy-in from a majority of Kurds in the southeast will require hard bargaining and more demonstrative official recognition of the Kurdish identity.

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